



A small business in Greenville becomes a family affair

A company called PlayNation that specializes in play equipment might seem like a dream to any child, but PlayNation of Greenville really has been a dream come true for small business owner Veronica Wilson. Because she's in a business for children, Veronica, a devoted mother of three, can be in business with her children.

On a warm Thursday afternoon, Veronica's youngest children, Illiana, and Chachi, are mopping the floor at PlayNation. Sometimes Illiana and Chachi take phone calls; sometimes they take customers' children to play on PlayNation's distinctively wooden play equipment while their parents finish a purchase. And sometimes Veronica's "sales children" invite friends over to play on playsets with names like Crusoe's Treehouse and Monster Kingdom, providing a great advertising service for Veronica's business.

The previous day, Veronica's stepson Jacob, a member of his high school football team, had assisted in a promotional event at PlayNation with his friends from the football team and the cheerleading squad.

Veronica's husband Donald, who retired from the military after 23 years of service, is also involved in his wife's PlayNation distributorship. He regularly makes trips to Kennesaw, Ga.--location of the PlayNation company's play set manufacturing plant--to bring play equipment to his wife's Greenville distributorship. He also opens the store on Sunday, Veronica's one day of rest, for birthday parties and church groups; one of the children often volunteers to help.

"It's truly a family affair," Veronica says of her business. "We work as a team."

Although she had a career in sales before the birth of her two children, Veronica initially decided to become a stay-at-home mom. After her two high risk pregnancies resulted in the premature birth of both children, however, she and her husband were left with major medical bills. Veronica felt that she needed to help her husband contribute to the family income. She took a part-time job at a nearby YMCA where, with its child-friendly environment, she was able to bring her children to work.

On a summer day eight years ago, while Donald was away for his annual training with the Army Reserve, Veronica decided to take Illiana and Chachi for a drive. She had heard of PlayNation, so when she spotted the Greenville distributorship, she and her children decided to take a look.

While she was inside, the store manager complained to her about having to miss his son's baseball game to come into work. Suddenly aware of a job possibility, Veronica asked the manager if she could help at the PlayNation distributorship. The manager agreed, and she started working there part-time, eventually giving up her job at the YMCA. The owners at the time were "blown away" by her sales; Veronica could sell four or five playsets on a typical Saturday.

"The Lord's given me a talent for sales," she says.

Unknown to Veronica, the owners of the PlayNation distributorship had approached the current manager on several occasions about purchasing the store, but the manager never made a definite commitment.

"And one day," Veronica says, "they asked me in jest, 'Wouldn't you like to take it over?'" She replied that, while they might be only joking, she would like to take their proposition seriously.

Veronica had always wanted to own a small business.

"When I was young, my father used to always tell me, 'You need to own your own business,'" she says. But Veronica thought that she could not pursue that idea until her youngest children were older.

Veronica visited the Greenville Small Business Development Center (SBDC) in 2002 to request assistance with her business plan for the PlayNation distributorship, which she and the owners had decided she would purchase.

"The SBDC has been such a wonderful tool," Veronica says.

After securing SBA-guaranteed loan for \$60,000, the purchase was officially transacted on New Years Eve 2002.

The SBDC has continued to assist Veronica in her small business ownership. Through the SBDC, she has met people involved in real estate and marketing who have helped her with her business.

"I want to be open to suggestions to improve," Veronica says.

But Veronica might not have too much room left for improvement. Since she became owner of the Greenville PlayNation distributorship, sales have increased steadily each year. She has continued--and improved upon--the tradition of renting the 6,000 sq. ft. PlayNation showroom to families for birthday parties, as well as to children's sports teams and church youth events. She has even added a kitchenette and picnic tables for their convenience.

"I've always been a hard worker," Veronica says. "I work six days a week and sometimes it feels like 24 hours a day. Sure, the long hours are sometimes very hard."

Still, Veronica says, "I just feel extremely blessed."

"I feel like I am so fortunate ... (Because) I do need to work, there's no other thing I'd rather be doing."

And, of course, Illiana and Chachi are her main consideration: "The hardest thing to do would be to work and not be with my children."

Despite her full schedule, Veronica is involved in her stepson's high school organizations, such as the booster club, and is active in her church. She even considers PlayNation, often host to a variety of church-related events, an extension of her activity for the church: "For me, it's a means of ministry," she says.

Veronica sees her thriving small business as an investment in her family's future.

"My dream," she says, "is that my children will take over."